James Ray Is in Coma, but Family Retains Hope

NASHVILLE, Dec. 25 (AP) — James Earl Ray is in a coma suffering from liver and kidney damage, and family members hope he can survive long enough for a hearing that they hope will finally start the process of clearing him in the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Mr. Ray, 68, who confessed to the 1968 shooting death of the civil rights leader and has been trying to recant ever since, was in critical condition today at Columbia Nashville Memorial Hospital, said Freda Herndon, a spokeswoman for the hospital.

Jerry Ray said today that he would authorize putting his brother on life-support equipment if necessary. Mr. Ray said his brother's lawyer and a minister had convinced him that chances were good that a hearing would be held on Feb. 20 at which lawyers would be able to begin a legal process they say would clear James Earl Ray. On Tuesday, Jerry Ray had said he would refuse to try to prolong his brother's life.

William Pepper, James Earl Ray's lawyer, is trying to get permission from Judge Joseph Brown Jr. of Criminal Court to test the murder weapon, which was found with Mr. Ray's fingerprints.

Mr. Pepper and James Earl Ray think that tests on the rifle would prove it was not the murder weapon. Prosecutors say the tests are a waste of time and could damage the evidence.

"Judge Brown is an honest judge in Memphis," Jerry Ray said. "If James dies, that hearing won't happen. If James dies, he goes down in history as Martin Luther King's killer, and that makes the whole Ray family look bad."

The Rev. James Lawson, a Los Angeles pastor who had a church in Memphis in 1968, is one of several black leaders who have said they do not believe Mr. Ray
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